

Marie McEntee: Lessons in mishandled anti-moth campaign

New Zealand Herald
16 Dec, 2007 6:58pm



Aerial spraying of the painted apple moth generated a strong public reaction. Photo / Glenn Jeffrey

By: Marie McEntee

KEY POINTS

The Ombudsman's criticism of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's handling of the spraying of the biological insecticide Foray 48B over West Auckland has reopened old wounds for many spray opponents who have fought to be heard since spraying began in 2002.

Spray opponents and ministry officials will never agree. The ministry's scientific perspective is dominated by technical language and risk assessments based on probabilities around known risks.

The community's social perspective draws on people's experiences and their concern about unknown and long-term risks. Their focus is on safety, not risk management.

But if we leave the situation at this obvious stalemate, we will never learn from this experience. The ministry has never publicly acknowledged the impact that its failure to contain the moth in the initial stages had on the long-term shape of the programme and on the

community's perception of the ministry's competency.

If the ministry had aerially sprayed with Foray 48B when the moth was confined to the small industrial zone of Glen Eden, the chance of the campaign spreading into an 8000ha, \$90 million operation affecting thousands of West Aucklanders might have been avoided.

Biosecurity campaigns that involve the use of aerial sprays over urban areas to eradicate pest invaders present governments with enormous challenges. How those in charge work with affected communities is crucial to the success and acceptance of these campaigns.

Government authorities must be responsive to the communities in which they work. Concerns expressed by the West Auckland community and its elected local government were frequently overlooked by the ministry.

It also sidelined calls by experts who had been involved with the earlier East Auckland spraying of the white-spotted tussock moth. The positive and negative experiences gained from that campaign should have helped to shape the West Auckland programme.

The ministry's eradication of the painted apple moth was embroiled in controversy over the risks associated with the spraying. In the ministry's final independent risk assessment carried out by an Australian toxicologist, it was suggested that a number of community health concerns appeared to be more closely related to the aerial nature of the spraying and to the associated adverse media publicity.

My analysis of media coverage of both the white-spotted tussock moth and the painted apple moth campaigns showed that coverage in the latter programme was significantly more negative than the earlier campaign.

But the coverage was affected by the way each campaign was managed, and how well the ministries responsible engaged, listened to and involved their communities.

If government institutions are to learn anything from their experience in these campaigns, they must examine the effect their management, and the way they deliberate on issues, can affect both public and media acceptance of their work.

The painted apple moth campaign favoured public education over engagement. The marginalisation of those who openly opposed them created stronger and louder opposition. Their refusal to use the experience and expertise gained from the earlier tussock moth campaign, and their strained relationship with local and regional government, resulted in a programme beset by widespread criticism.

This initially alienated potentially strong and respected scientific and community allies and prevented the use of already established community networks.

The Biosecurity Act provides the framework under which ministries involved in matters relating to biosecurity are required to undertake their responsibilities. It contains wide powers for those in authority, including protection against liability. It grants authorities significant powers to carry out such duties. Most significantly, it does not require community involvement or engagement.

It is difficult to gauge from these eradication programmes whether communities will ever be able to significantly influence government on biosecurity decisions, particularly when there is little legislative support to facilitate this.

If the ministry is to learn anything from its experiences with the painted apple moth, it must be that in future campaigns it must step beyond the narrow operational focus of its statutory obligations and engage meaningfully with communities affected by its actions.

This calls for all sides to work together and learn from experience. During conflict, it is time to engage, not withdraw.

*** Marie McEntee teaches science communication at the University of Auckland.**

https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10482714